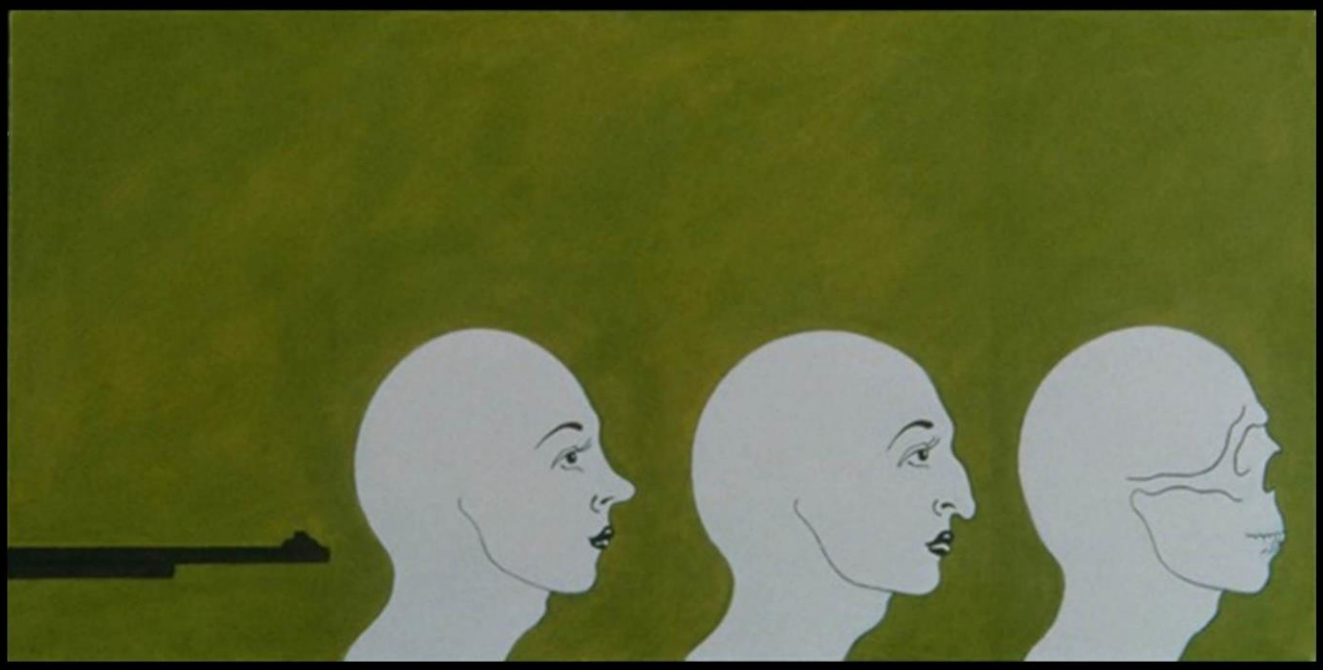


Babi Yar, Buchenwald, Balkans: A Post-Modern Portrayal

Artwork by M. Annenberg

20th Century Trends towards Totalitarianism, Racism, and Genocide

Introduction

As witnessed in our time, the ethnic crimes of genocide and racism are visually confronted in this exhibit. Through the metaphor of appropriation, these paintings borrow compositional devices from Goya, Bosch, Michelangelo, Cezanne, and Warhol. A common thread unites Babi Yar and the Balkans, that is, the wholesale killing of civilian populations, based on religion. It is through memory that we sanctify the losses of the past. It is through memory that we engage the young in the lessons of the past.

A videotaped 20 minute lecture is available on DVD.

Reflection and Transformation:
Marcia Annenberg's *Babi Yar, Buchenwald, Balkans: A Post-Modern Portrayal*

Art, like all of human enterprise, has its truisms. Two of these are particularly relevant to this body of work by Marcia Annenberg. One truism is that almost all of art involves emulation and transformation; what strikes us as new is most often a brilliant re-vision of what has been seen and visually said before. The Greeks emulate and transform the Tyrian (Phoenician) long house temple by synthesizing it to the Egyptian continuous colonnade to create their magnificent temples; the Romans synthesize the Greek temple surrounded by columns and stylobate to the Etruscan temple elevated on a platform with front stairs and porch to engender the Roman temple. In a parallel transformation, they pull the arch free of surrounding supports, multiply it *ad infinitum* to create aqueducts and amphitheaters, and three-dimensionalize it to create the free-standing dome—the most famous of which, the Pantheon (the Temple to all the gods) becomes the body to which they attach the Corinthian-styled porch which the Greeks evolved by developing the acanthus leaf-capped column from the Egyptians. By the Renaissance, the dome was being further transformed in the hands of artists like Brunelleschi in Florence and Michelangelo in Rome. And indeed all of the elements of classical style would continue to be used and re-visioned in myriad civic and religious contexts from Washington, D.C.'s capitol dome to the dome of the Temple designed in 1924 by Charles Greco to crown congregation Tiferet Israel's synagogue building in Cleveland, Ohio.

What is true of architecture is true of sculpture and painting. And in the last-noted instance—a synagogue designed by a non-Jewish architect in the spiritually open atmosphere of an America where only in the last seventy-five years has it become common for Jews to be the architects of synagogues—that second truism of more recent art history emerges, this one with two parts to it. The first is that there has been an inordinately large number of Jews who have become visual artists in the past century. The second is that, sooner or later, many of these Jewish artists (must) ask themselves how they might understand themselves as artists—how they fit—within the Western artistic tradition when that tradition has, for more than fifteen centuries, been largely Christian.

Marcia Annenberg's *Babi Yar, Buchenwald, Balkans: A Post-Modern Portrayal* not only addresses both truisms. In addressing the Holocaust and reflecting on it as an event of profound historical significance of which the reverberations are perversely contemporary (rather than out-of-date by being locked into the specific time and place in the past when the event transpired) she has yielded to an imperative, perhaps a third truism of art in the modern era. That is the sense of how important art can be as an instrument of responding to the world beyond the canvas or stone or wooden block. For Jewish artists in particular, that aspect of the outside world, which was the Holocaust, demands response—and the most compelling responses are those which seek larger contexts

into which to fit an event that offers too much contradiction to fit into any simple framework.

The most obvious contradiction—it is another truism regarding humanity as a species—is between the fact that we *do* make art, that humans are endlessly creative in so many directions, but are far more destructive than any other species on the planet. The Holocaust proves merely to be one of the more egregious demonstrations of our peculiar ability to harness our energies to the goal of destroying each other and of conceiving of ever more horrific means of torturing each other along the way. What Nazis did to Jews and others over half a century ago, Serbian Christians did to Bosnian Muslims less than a decade ago.

As a species we are also blessed with an extraordinary capacity for memory, but our memories are remarkably fallacious; they are selective and distortive—but also sometimes crystalline when we would prefer to forget painful events. The Soviets could spend half a century forgetting that Jews were slaughtered near Babi Yar by their Ukrainian neighbors on behalf of and instead of directly by their Nazi overlords as easily as Adolf Eichmann could forget that the trains whose schedules he controlled carried human cattle to houses of slaughter at a dozen Buchenwalds. One of art's roles is to be an instrument of memory as it is an instrument in which memory is deliberatively re-visioned, with full and conscious, not casual or unconscious intent. It is an aspect of furthering civilization and of recording the ways in which the most civilized of humans can reduce themselves to barbarism.

* * * * *

The movement in American art most overtly directed toward socio-political commentary was Social Realism; it was a movement in painting between the wars, dominated by Jews and their sense of the importance of art as an instrument in fixing the world by making us think about it relentlessly. Ben Shahn was perhaps the most emphatic among the Social Realists regarding the reflective imperative of this style of art. (His best-known series focused on the hypocrisy and miscarriage of justice in the trial and execution of the Italian-American immigrants Sacco and Vanzetti in 1933-34.

Not surprisingly, Marcia Annenberg's paintings and drawings offer a direct connection with Social Realism—her work is deliberate in its intention to comment and it is figuratively representational so that the messages are impossible to avoid—even as her work transmutes that movement's visual and conceptual principles in new directions, most obviously in furthering the principle of simplified line and flattened perspective, and in its post-modernist reach into issues that transcend time, which reach causes it to draw from a wide range of works of Western art as sources of inspiration and reflection.

One recognizes, for instance, the general shape of Hieronymus Bosch's sixteenth-century triptych of *The Hay Wagon* in Annenberg's painting of the same name. Bosch's

work was inspired by a Flemish proverb regarding human greed: “The world is a hay wagon from which each person takes what s/he can.” The central image symbolizes our world; the left wing shows the Garden of Paradise from which Adam and Eve are being exiled—and which, by implication, awaits the return of the virtuous after death. The right wing offers the fire and brimstone of hell, which awaits those whose lives are focused on vice. Annenberg has reduced her image to simple, elegant forms, large swatches of color that recall Milton Avery’s engagement of Matisse’s engagement of color fields that would, in turn, be engaged by the chromatic abstract expressionists. The chimney spewing fire and smoke from Bosch’s hell-wing has been transferred to the other side of Annenberg’s work. The hay wagon has become a kind of tractor, bearing on it and in its wake faceless figures, receding into infinity toward the horizon, which the artist has identified as refugees from Kosovo.

Nothing has changed in nearly five centuries, except the source of hope: in Bosch’s painting the figure of Christ, self-sacrificing Redeemer of humankind, hovers in the golden cloud that fills the sky of the central section. In Annenberg’s painting that large white cloud is empty of any figure and echoed by the gasses of the volcanic upsurge to the viewer’s left and the billowing smoke to our right. One might understand the intended commentary along two simultaneous lines. One, that ugly human characteristics are carried across time—from the era of Adam and Eve to that of Hieronymus Bosch to our own. Two, that as the source of the ugliness in the world is ourselves then it is we and not God in human form who can and must solve the problem of that ugliness; that as a Jew, the artist rejects a Christian solution to the problem of evil: neither the figure of Christ nor the principle of a triune God (which the triptych form itself traditionally symbolizes) is the answer to the problem of human greed and human-engendered evil.

That this is so is demonstrated for Jews most profoundly by the problematic of the Holocaust, when the evidence of Christian mercy was too often so obviously and profoundly invisible and the problem of what God is can be subsumed to the problem of what humans are. Among Annenberg’s paintings, which alludes to this, is *The Housewife*, where the solitary figure is loosely, structurally based on that of Cezanne’s *The Bather*. But the bather is isolated in a field of blue and in his own interior thought processes, as he faces out towards us; he is a study in figure, texture, and the representation of the modernist sense of aloneness in a world where the existence of God has been brought boldly into question. The very tone and texture of that question has changed by the time—after two world wars and the rearing up of the twin serpents of fascism and Nazism—the housewife has replaced the bather. She faces away from us, isolated by virtue of the tower and barbed wire that share her space and echo her form—and are instantly recognizable as Holocaust-evocative. (The tower most overtly echoes her form, but the diagonals of her right arm, which echo those of the bather’s two arms, are echoed both by the tower roof line and also by the wire mesh that continues the line of her lowered left arm.) That was an event in which the victims

systematically chosen for torture and death were largely abandoned by their human brethren. It offered new nuance to the action of existential aloneness.

There are other Holocaust-related images, of course, in this series that connect to icons of Western painting. Thus, in moving backward in time, we recognize a sardonic play on the most sardonic of Warhol's pop art images as they address the notion of beauty by means of juxtaposing "before" and "after" images of "fixed" profiled noses. In the context of the classification of racial types—Jews, gypsies, Slavs, Aryans—for Hitler's exterminationist purposes, in which nose types and hair types and eye types and lip types were synthesized to notions of mental and moral types, the implications of this play are far more serious than those of a Campbell's soup can. In Hitler's world, nose-fixing, social assimilation, and even religious conversion were alike in their inability to save those chosen for the gas chambers. To translate that image, as Annenberg has done, into a progression that leads from the nose of a rifle to two differently-nosed profiles to a skeletal profile without a nose or eyes or lips at all—and to name it *Babi Yar/Bosnia*—is both to make that context clear and to enlarge the context fifty years beyond the Nazi era.

So, too, we recognize the backdrop of Goya's early nineteenth century *The Executions of the Third of May* in Annenberg's *Resistance*, but the anonymous backs of the executioners have been updated from Napoleonic French to Hitlerian German soldiers, and the victims are a trinity of rabbis rather than the Christ-like figure illuminated by the supernatural light of Goya's image. *Shower* recalls that central moment in Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, where the Hand of God, dynamic and pulsating, is about to touch, and thereby energize, the limp hand of Adam in a splendid visualization of the *anima*-tion (literally, the besoulment) of the first human by an all-powerful, benevolent, and loving God. But the skeletal figures in Annenberg's work are moving in the opposite direction from those in Michelangelo—from life to death not death to life—and if they are *all* skeletal, *all* overwhelmed by the white gas filling the picture plane, then none of them is God. So where is God in this picture? Where is God in the picture of *all* such events? How do we understand God and how do we understand how we who have killed each other for generations in God's name should move forward into a new century and a new millennium?

But none of these images is restricted to being a comment on the Holocaust or on the problem of Jewish-Christian relations or even human-Divine relations evoked by the Holocaust. It is not only that Annenberg connects other specific times and places to Buchenwald and Babi Yar in their murderous heyday. It is not only that there are specific works which function as specific symbols of other issues, such as American apathy in more recent contexts, or of the American cowboy idea of how to conquer the world—so different and no different at all from imperial ambitions across human time and space. It is that, while all of these works share in common the narrow focus on the

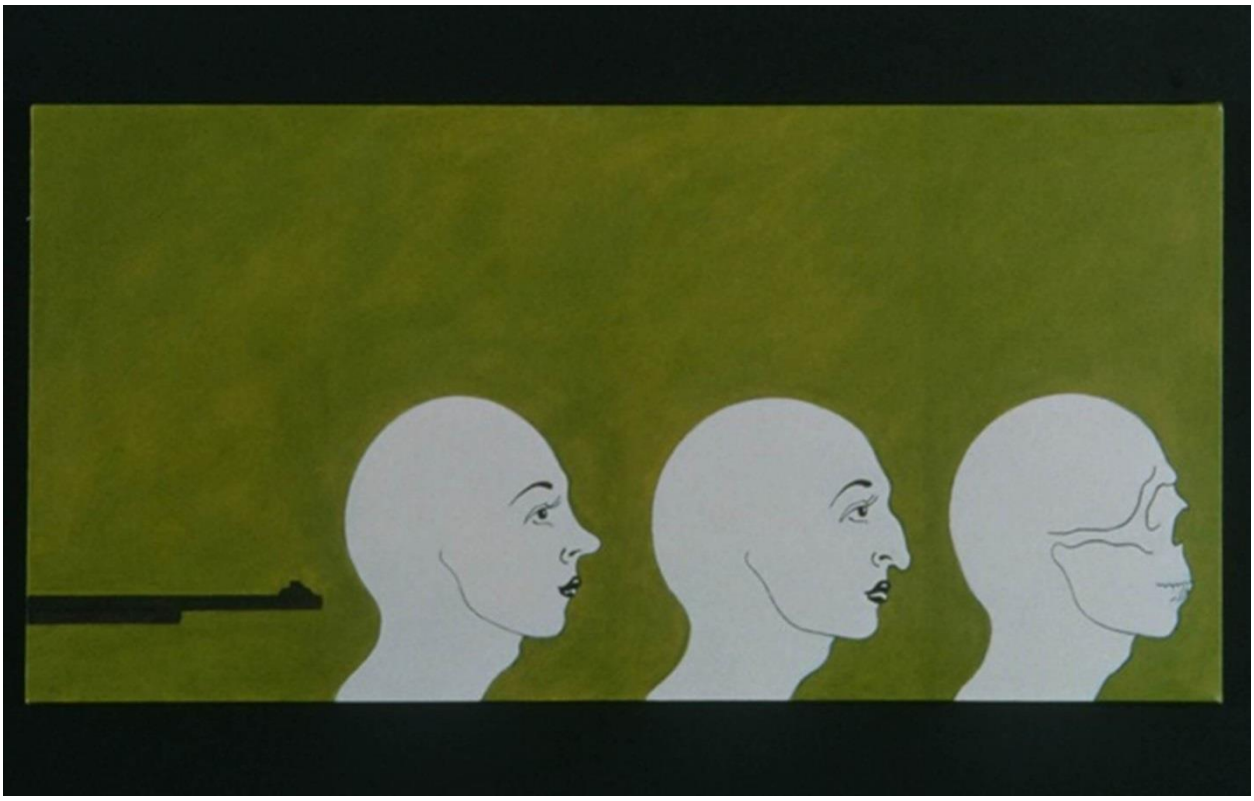
horrors that humans have wrought against each other and the world around us, they are broad, both because they draw from and transform such an array of images from the long Western visual tradition—and because the story they tell is even older and wider than that long tradition.

Moreover, in forcing the viewer to think about an array of interlocking issues, Annenberg's works also do something else: they begin to propose a solution to the problem of ourselves. For the beginning of the answer resides in the willingness to ask the question. The desire to be part of the solution and the answer is called, in Hebrew, *tikkun olam*—fixing the world. The artist fits herself into a long Jewish tradition obligating one to do that; she ties herself to the notion that this is one of the important purposes of art, as the Jew among the founding Impressionists, Camille Pissarro, first observed nearly 150 years ago—which observation was carried forth by Ben Shahn and other Social Realists and embraced by a range of important artists in the decades since.

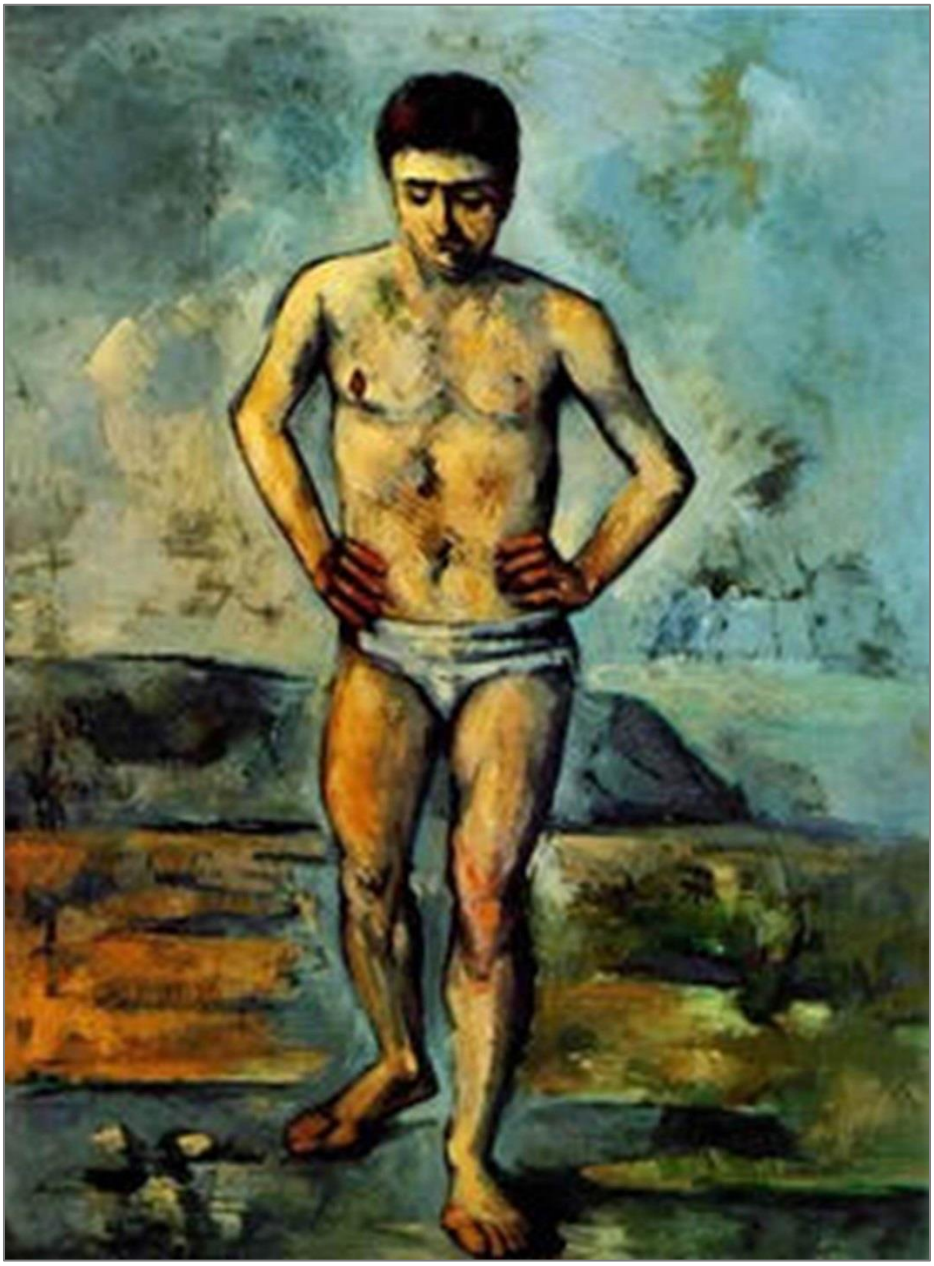
So her work is part of the process of challenging the viewer to challenge the forces of apathy and the subtle as well as obvious evil that coexists with all that is so good in the enterprise of being human in the world. And her work is part of a long evolving visual history, in which her chosen instruments of concision and simple elegance cut through important issues to the bone.

Ori Z. Soltes
Georgetown University

Before and After **by Andy Warhol**

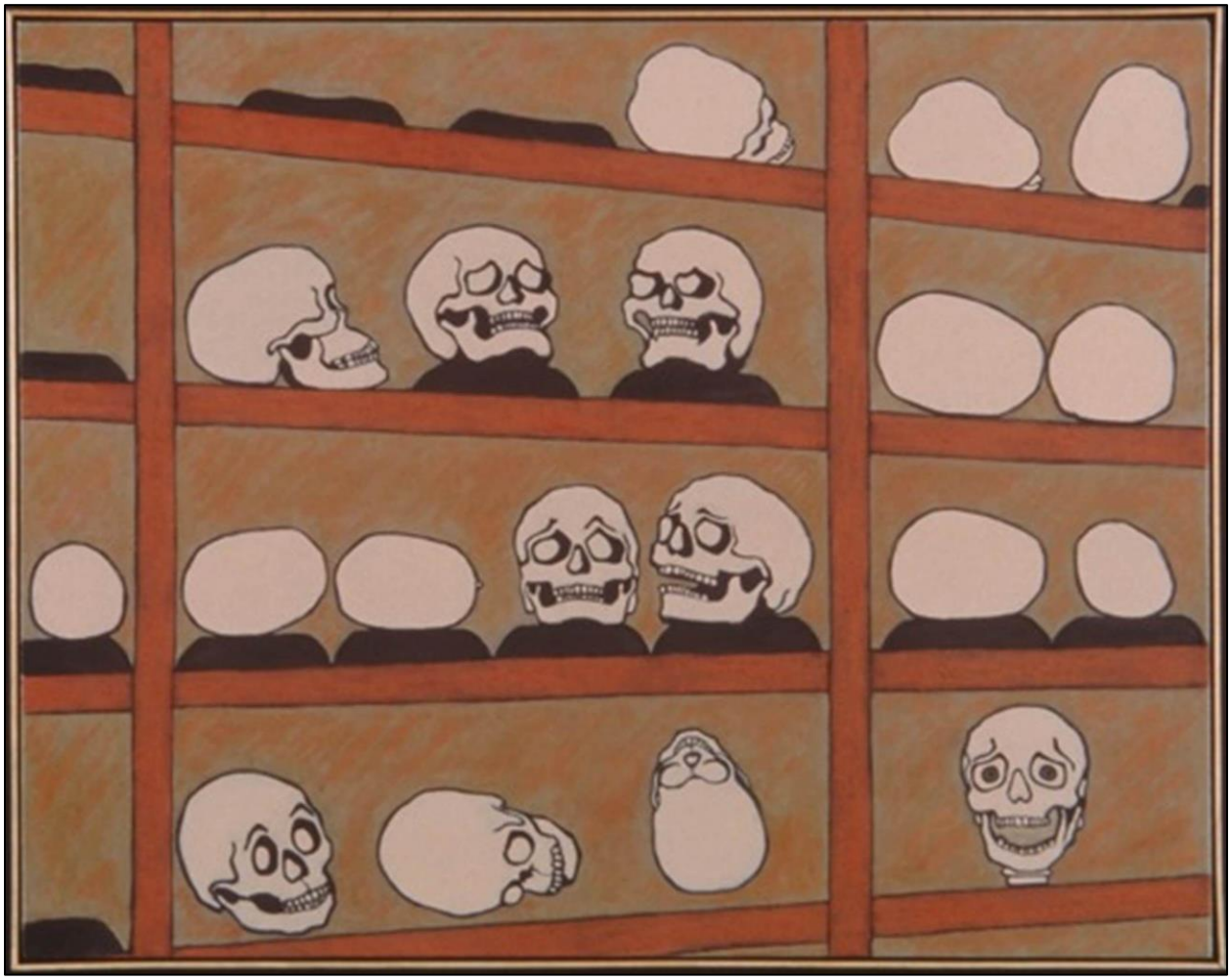


Babi Yar/ Bosnia



The Bather **by Paul Cézanne**

The Housewife
Collection, Florida Holocaust Museum, St. Petersburg, FL

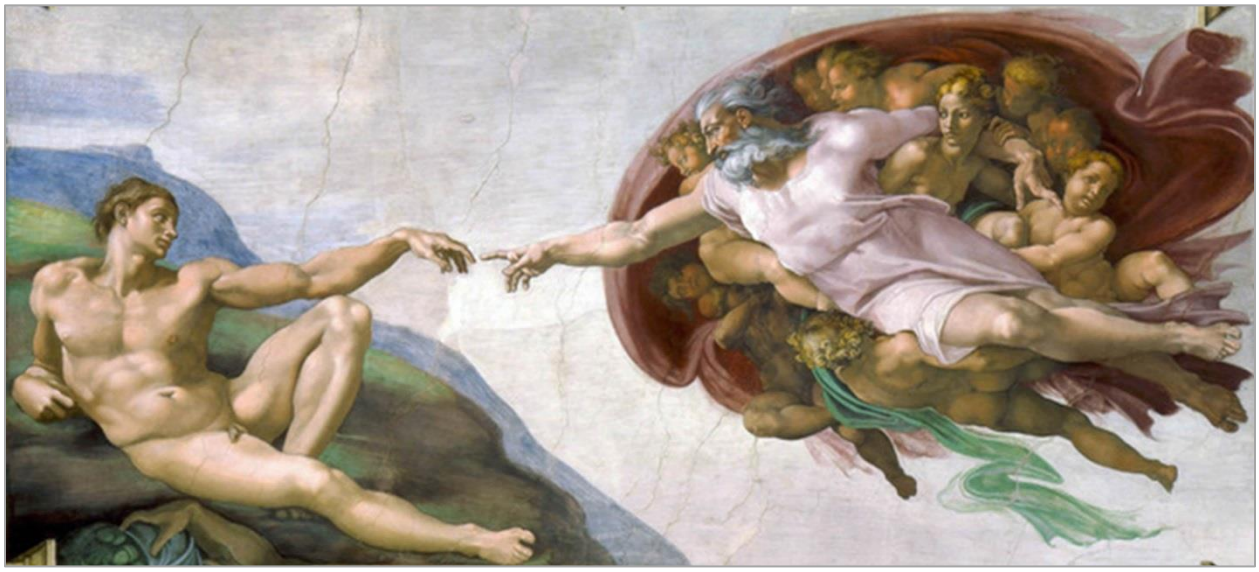


Buchenwald Remembered

In the Still of the Night
Collection, Vina Goan Jewish State Museum, Lithuania

The Third of May 1808 **by Francisco Goya**

Resistance
Collection, The Art Museum at Yad Vashem



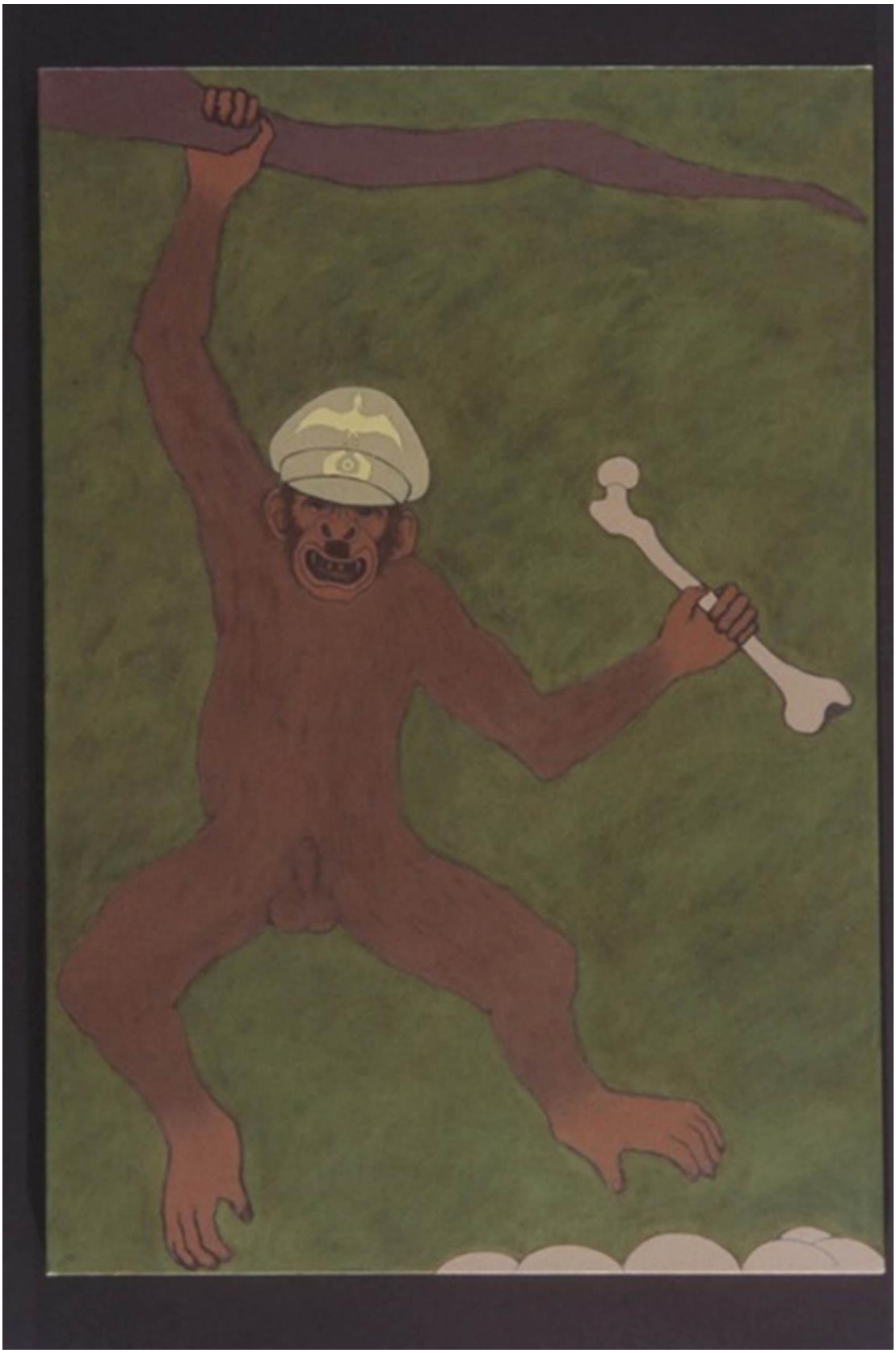
The Creation of Adam **by Michelangelo Buonarroti**

Shower

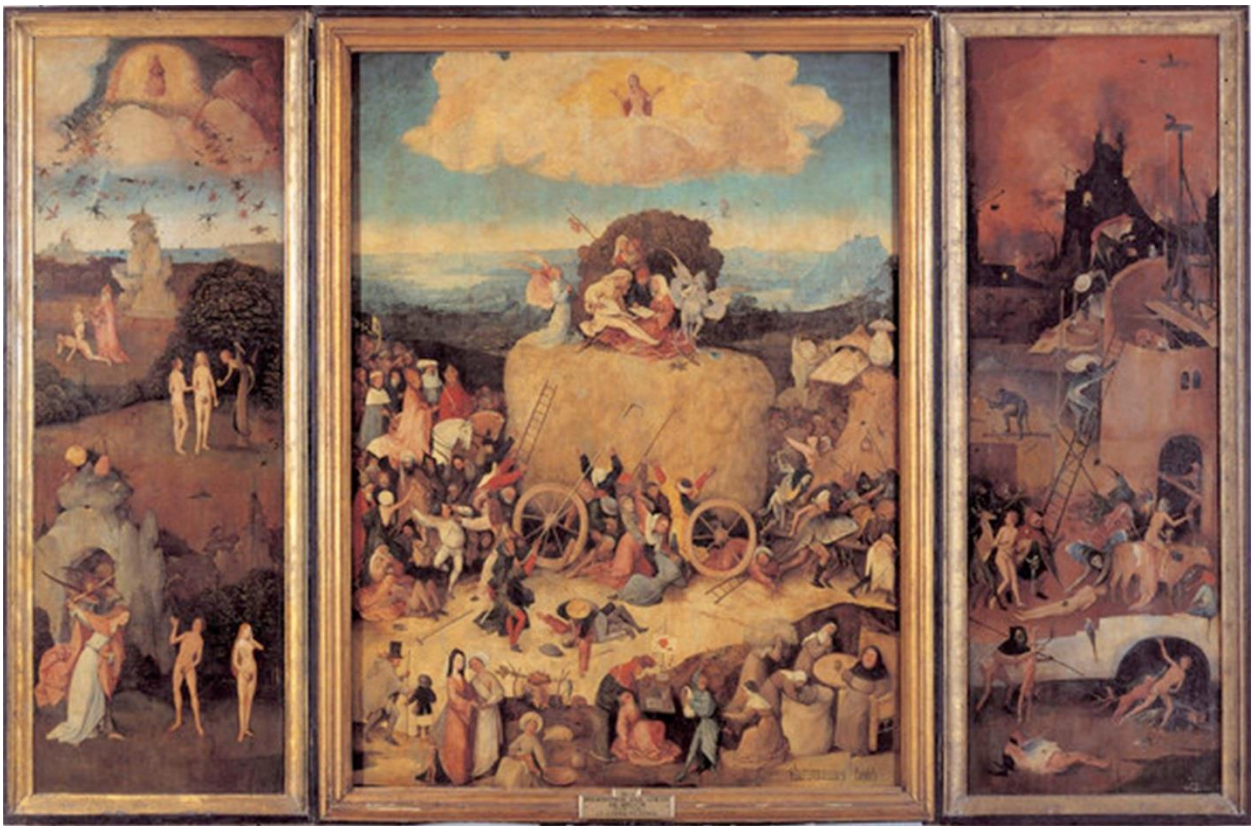
The Disappeared
Collection, The London Jewish Museum of Art, London

Wedding Party

20th Century Landscape



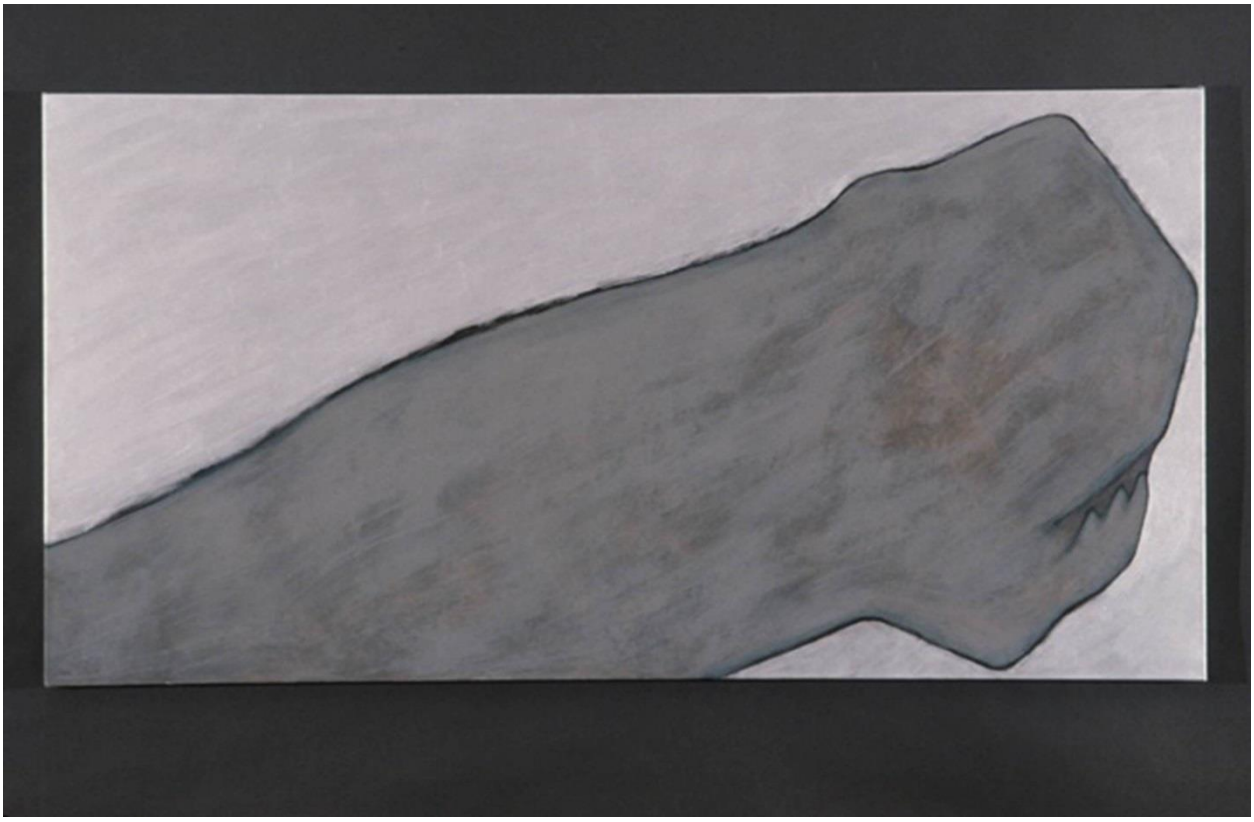
Fascist



The Haywain **by Hieronymous Bosch**

The Haywagon

My Mishbucha
Collection, The Rockland Center for Holocaust Studies, New York



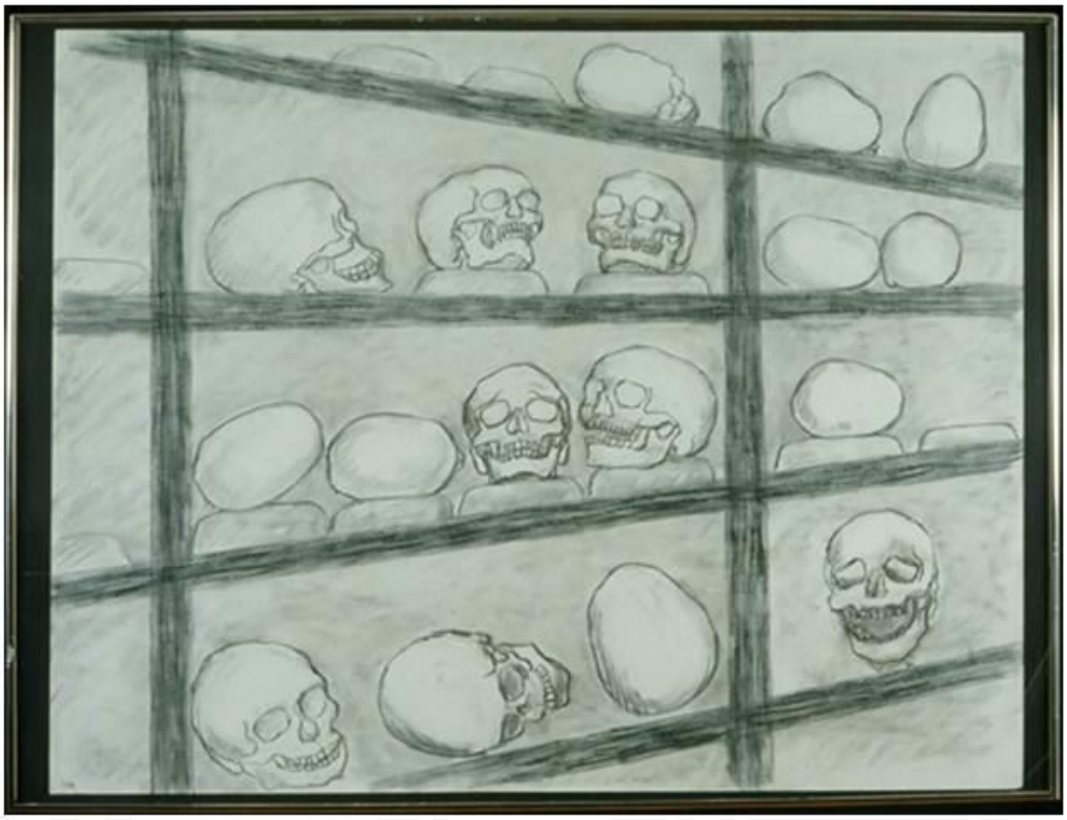
Rebirth

Gold Rush

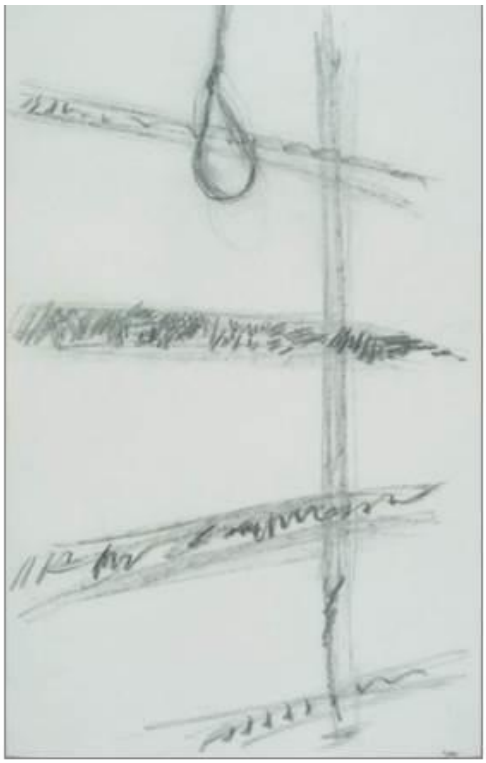
No Way Out, No Way In

Study No. 1

Study No. 3



Study No. 2



Study No. 4

Study No. 6

Study No. 5

Because sometimes you just gotta get out

From terror, terrifying images

Marcia Annenberg wasn't always obsessed with the Holocaust, and she wasn't always a painter. In fact, the artist whose works currently are on view at the Holocaust Memorial Resource and Education Center had been a musician first – a violinist and pianist – and didn't dwell on her artistic inspiration until just a few years ago.

"I got married and my interests changed," said Annenberg, 45, from her New York home. "I began to think about bringing a child into the world, and I think that at that point the issues in the world became more compelling to me than abstract things.

"The issues had always been there, but I think that's when they came to the surface. It has something to do with the Jewish concept of repairing the world; you want to fix what's wrong."

What was wrong was historical: the Holocaust, and Annenberg's own sense of fatalism that came from a childhood of cowering under her desk, preparing for a nuclear attack. But it also is current, an ongoing inhumanity that is now showing up in such international trouble spots as Bosnia and Rwanda, and it is pervasive, she said.

"When I was a kid growing up in New York, I watched TV and I saw documentaries of what went on – I saw the liberation of the camps, the piles of bodies. Mine was a very political family, and you heard what went on. ... But there was no way to understand."

There's still no way to understand; there's just the art that springs so vividly from Annenberg's hand. Her work has been shown in galleries and museums in Europe and the United States, and she has been a guest lecturer at universities and museums in Europe and the United States.

Her work is now on view at the Holocaust Memorial Resource and Education Center in Maitland, where she is a volunteer docent. She has been there since the center opened in 1992, and she has been moved by how closely current events parallel those of the Holocaust. "I am particularly struck by the war in Bosnia because it seems so much the same," she said, her mild tones becoming more passionate.

CULTURE SHOCK

WHAT: "Will There Be a New World Order?" works by Marcia Annenberg

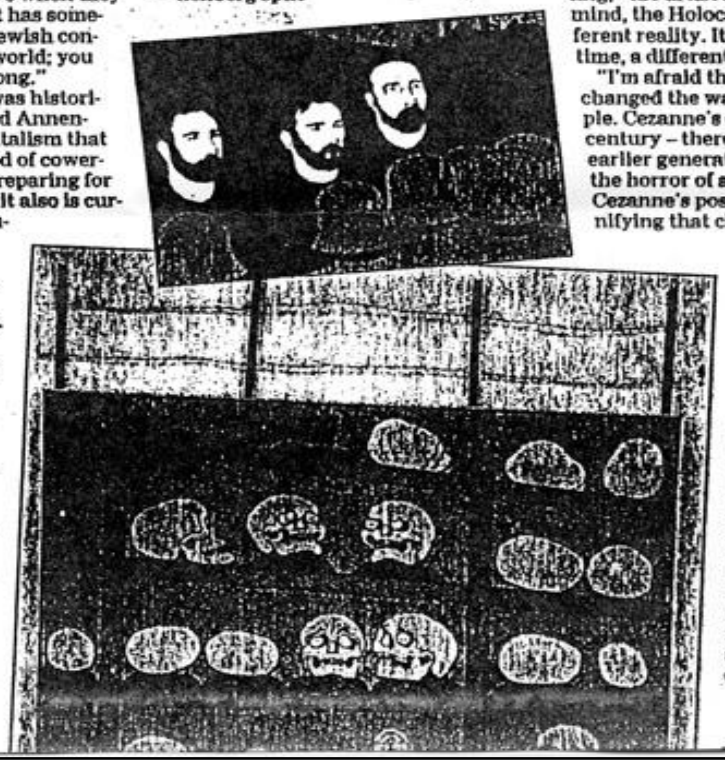
WHERE: Holocaust Memorial Research and Education Center, Maitland

WHEN: Through Feb. 28

COST: Free; 628-0555

"A lot of research went into these paintings, a lot of it done at the Jewish Theological Seminary," she said, as the high voice of her 3-year-old piped up in the background. "Then in 1992 *Time* magazine had an article on the Holocaust, and I thought, 'My God! This is *deja vu*!' It was incredible – it *is* incredible.

Annenberg turned from music to painting, in the classical tradition, after meeting Isaac Soyer. While earning her master's degree in fine arts at New York University, Annenberg split her interests and approach into two distinct branches: the lyrical abstraction of Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell by day and, at the Art Students League in the evening, "precise realistic rendering" with Soyer, Robert Beverly Hale and Daniel Green.



From about 1960 to 1990, she was a typical contemporary artist working in an abstract mode. Her concerns were current, expressed in the dominant style of the moment. Then, while vacationing in Maine, Annenberg felt her repressed sense of outrage crystallize. "I realized that we grew up with a sense of terror," she said. "I began to paint, because everyone has to find their own ways to face evil. For me, reacting is very important – losing the ability to react is really horrible, and it happens.

"We're bombarded with brutality, and that numbs us so that we may start objectifying evil. My work is my reaction. But it doesn't depict actual events – it's more conceptual. You have to key into what's behind the image," Annenberg said. "In 'The Housewife,' my favorite painting, I was thinking of the famous Cezanne 'Bather.'

"So what's the connection? The Cezanne figure is bucolic, set against a landscape. The pose in 'The Housewife' is the same, but she's in an entirely different setting," the artist said, quietly. "In my mind, the Holocaust created a different reality. It created a different time, a different space.

"I'm afraid this century has changed the way people view people. Cezanne's outlook was 19th century – there was no way he and earlier generations could imagine the horror of a Holocaust. I used Cezanne's pose was a way of magnifying that change.

"Today I look at the world differently," Annenberg said. "I guess what I'm referring to is a loss of innocence. ... There's been a crisis of faith in our time – today's people are lost. We've lost our cultural and religious roots," she said even more quietly, as her child became louder in the background. "Our childhood was robbed; we don't feel safe anymore. We need to react; we need to find our faith again."

— *Laura Stewart*

Artist brings stark reality into focus at HMREC exhibit

by Richard H. Gleick

Walking into the display room of the Holocaust Memorial Resource and Education Center, the viewer is almost overwhelmed at the power of Marcia Annenberg's Holocaust paintings, which were on exhibit through Feb. 28.

In an interview with *HERITAGE*, she spoke of her motivation in painting such powerful images, saying "It was the childhood memory of growing up with the images of these BBC programs about the liberation of the death camps. It stayed with me all my life.

How do you come to grips with the past and create a future for your child?

"I did a lot of research and spent of lot of time at the Jewish Theological Seminary. I tried to understand it...It is an evil thing beyond any kind of understanding."

Even though she has no Holocaust victims or survivors in her family- her parents' families arriving in the United States by the 1920s - her paintings grimly convey the starkness and horror that was the Holocaust.

Among those on display is "Buchenwald Remembered," perhaps the starkest in the collection, recalling and envisioning the horror of the concentration camps (it appears from today's news that Buchenwald set a precedent for the terror that is now perpetuated in Bosnia) and was influenced by a photo of the liberation of Buchenwald by the Allies. Rows of skulls, which represent the victims, lie on the wooden planks that served as beds. Some of the skulls face forward, each with its own expression of disbelief or horror. The others resemble eggs lying inert on the shelf as if each life were no more than a pile of groceries, a still life with no identity or purpose - dehumanized.

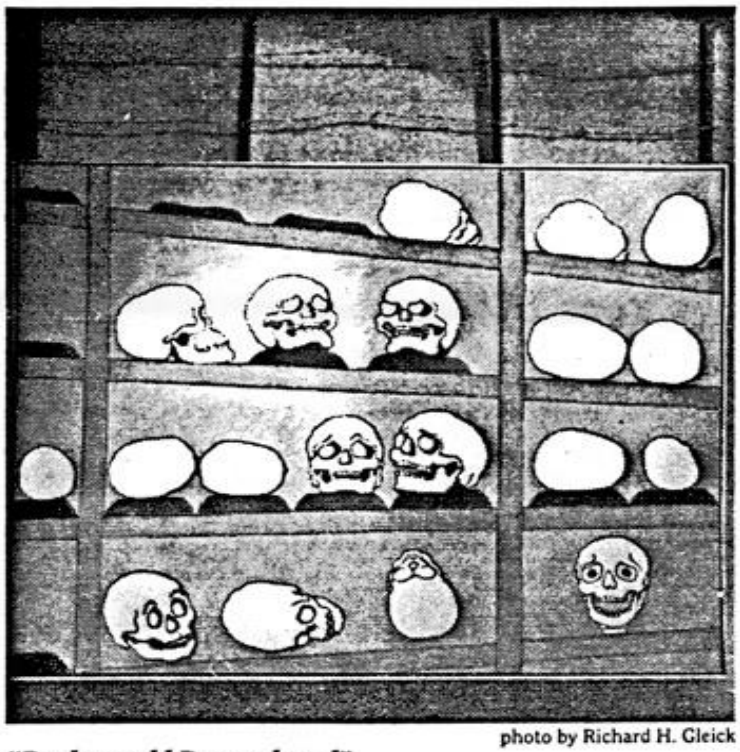


photo by Richard H. Gleick

"Buchenwald Remembered"

Also displayed are "No Way Out, No Way In, 1940," referring to the shameful manner in which the immigration laws of the United States were abused by the State Department and Congress in order to close the avenue of escape from Hitler's menace; "Shower, 1944," questioning the presumed absence of God at the time of the Holocaust, is based on Michaelangelo's "Creation of Adam," a work which testifies to an age of faith certain of God's presence and conveys theological doubt as two hands reach out to each other across the gas chamber, and "Babi Yar/ Bosnia," focusing on the reality of racial differences and the Aryan concept of racial perfection that is not yet dead - mass executions are taking place in Bosnia much as they did in Babi Yar.

THE HERITAGE, 2.28.97

M.ANNENBERG

Marcia Annenberg
CONCEPTUAL ARTIST
GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCATE
www.MANNENBERG.com

Marcia Annenberg – Artist Profile

M. Annenberg's current paintings, sculpture, installations & videos, focus on under-reported stories in American media: from 9/ 11, to climate change, to the loss of our constitutional protections. The documentation of the suppression of information in the media – is a disruptive strategy, which illuminates an inverse form of propaganda. What don't we know and why don't we know it? Unlike the recent fake news controversy, Annenberg researches real events, such as the IPCC 5th Assessment Reports, that are either not reported or are under-reported by certain media outlets.

M. Annenberg lectured at Princeton University's Bernstein Gallery, in conjunction with her exhibit, *News/Not News*. Her panel, at Flomenhaft Gallery, entitled, *Art, Activism, and Global Warming*, included Dr. Gavin Schmidt, Director, NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies. Her talks have been recorded and are available for viewing on her web-site, www.mannenberg.com.

M. Annenberg has been featured in solo and group exhibitions in museums and galleries throughout the United States, including the Flomenhaft Gallery and Raandesk Gallery, in New York City; the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio; the Red Chair Gallery in Kansas City, Missouri; the Pierro Gallery of South Orange, New Jersey; Princeton University's Bernstein Gallery, Princeton, New Jersey, and the Women's Museum in Dallas, Texas.

M. Annenberg's paintings are in the permanent collections of the London Jewish Museum of Art, England; the Yad Vashem Art Museum in Jerusalem, Israel; the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum in Vilnius, Lithuania, and the Florida Holocaust Museum, St. Petersburg, USA.

M. Annenberg's artwork is discussed in the BBC documentary, *The Private Life of a Masterpiece III* in the episode "The Third of May", which examines the history, significance, and contemporary resonance of Goya's influence.

Images of her work have been published as cover art for The Holocaust and Other Genocides: History, Representation, Ethics edited by Helmut Walser Smith (Vanderbilt University Press) and Project Censored, 2014, edited by Mickey Huff and Andy Lee Roth (Seven Stories Press). She studied at the Art Students League with Isaac Soyer and Robert Beverly Hale and later received an M.A. in Studio Art from New York University.

M. Annenberg has been named by ORIGIN Magazine as one of the top 100 Creative's of 2015 in North America. She is represented by Flomenhaft Gallery, NYC, www.flomenhaftgallery.com.

List of Works

1. **Babi Yar/Bosnia** (1992) 32x64 acrylic/canvas
2. **The Housewife** (1992) 36x56 acrylic/canvas
   (Collection – Florida Holocaust Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida)
3. **Buchenwald Remembered** (1990) 44x56 acrylic/ canvas
4. **In The Still of the Night** (1991) 54x62 acrylic/canvas
   (Collection – Vilna Goan Jewish State Museum, Lithuania)
5. **Resistance** (1992) 32x44 acrylic/canvas
   (Collection – Yad Vashem Art Museum, Israel)
6. **Shower** (1991) 57x45 acrylic/canvas, mixed media
7. **The Disappeared** (1996) 54x60 acrylic/canvas
   (Collection – The London Jewish Museum of Art, England)
8. **Wedding Party** (1992) 40x56 acrylic/canvas
9. **20th Century Landscape** (1997) 54x60 acrylic/canvas
10. **Fascist** (1992) 46x66 acrylic/canvas
11. **The Haywagon** (1999) 90x56 acrylic/canvas
12. **My Mishbucha** (1993) 27x19x7 mixed media
    (Collection – The Rockland Center for Holocaust Studies, New York)
13. **Rebirth** (1989) 32x62 acrylic/canvas
14. **Gold Rush** (1992) 36x72 acrylic/masonite
15. **No Way Out, No Way In** (1990) 74x29 acrylic/masonite, mixed media
16. **Study No. 1**, pencil
    (Collection – The Florida Holocaust Museum)
17. **Study No. 2**, 33x43, charcoal
18. **Study No. 3** (1990) 24x20, pencil
19. **Study No. 4**, 18x26, charcoal
20. **Study No. 5** (1992) 20x18, charcoal
21. **Study No. 6**, pencil
    (Collection – Art Museum at Yad Vashem

The Artist, M. Annenberg, Painting *Resistance*.